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þÿ S e x y b e a s t s a n i m i s t i c o n t o l o g y , s e x u a l i t y a n d rock art in Northern Fennoscandia

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Sexy Beasts: Animistic Ontology, Sexuality and Hunter-Gatherer Rock Art in Northern Fennoscandia

Antti Lahelma

Abstract

A wide range of rock art sites associated with hunter-gatherer populations in Northern Fennoscandia depict scenes where men, women and animals (usually elk or deer) are involved in a sexually charged act. For instance, at Nämforsen (Sweden) and Kanozero (north-western Russia), elks appear to be 'monitoring' a human couple having sex. Ithyphallic figures accompanied by animals are found at several sites, such as Kanozero, where an ithyphallic figure brandishing an elk-headed staff is faced by a capercaillie. Even acts of zoophilia, or humans in sexual congress with animals, appear to be depicted at a number of sites. These scenes are here approached in the light of an animistic ontology and the notion of perspectivism, introduced by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, where non-human beings are entangled in social and thus also sexual relations with humans. In the ethnographic sources pertaining to northern circumpolar cultures, hunting is perceived as a sexual act, where each kill involves seducing the prey. In northern and eastern parts of Finland and Karelia, this mentality persisted well into the historical period, as evidenced by hunting spells and ceremonies recorded in the 19th Century.

Keywords: rock art, Northern Europe, animism, hunting, sexuality

Introduction

'Then from far away across the world he smelled good things to eat, so he gave up being king of the wild things.' (Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*)

Maurice Sendak's classic children's book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) relates the story of a boy called Max, who is sent to his room without supper because he disobeys his mother. Angered, he no longer wants to be human, puts on a wolf costume and is transformed into some kind of wolf-child 'therianthrope'. He becomes a king of the monsters, makes friends with non-human beings, has a lot of fun, but eventually starts to feel lonely and wakes up from his animal-state when he smells warm human food, left in his room by his parents. He then returns back home and becomes a human again.

We find almost exactly the same theme of humans becoming lost in the world of the beasts – often woken up from their dream-like state by the smell of human food – in numerous anthropological accounts of hunter-gatherer peoples around the world, ranging from Canada (Hallowell 1960) to the Amazon forest (Viveiros de Castro 1998), to Siberia and beyond. To cite a rather recent account, the Danish anthropologist Rane Willerslev (2007: 89–90) has recorded the following story told to him by an elderly Yukaghir hunter, Nikolai Likhachev, which is said to have taken place during World War II:

> I had been following a herd of reindeer, a hundred head or more, for a long time, about six hours, I believe … As I searched the track, I had a strange feeling I was being watched. I looked up and I saw an old man about twenty meters ahead of me. He was dressed in the old fashion. He smiled at me. I asked him who he was, but he did not answer me. Instead, he gestured with his hand, showing me that I should follow him. I thought he had a cabin close by and some food, so I did so … I noticed his footprints were those of a reindeer. "Strange", I thought, because the man was wearing *kamus* [skin-covered skis]. But then I thought I was just hallucinating because I was tired and hungry. We walked up a hill and behind it was a huge camp, with thirty or more tents. We walked into the camp. There were people of all ages, children playing, old men sitting smoking, and women cooking. The old man took me to his tent. He spoke to his wife by grunting just like a reindeer, and she grunted back. I did not understand. "Who are these people?" I thought. The woman served me food, and I saw that it was not meat but lichen. I ate it because I was so hungry, and it was not too bad. As time passed and we sat there in the tent, I started forgetting things. I thought, for instance, about

> my wife, who was waiting for me back home, but realized that I had forgotten her name. Then we went to sleep. I dreamt that I was surrounded by reindeer. Someone said to me, "You do not belong here. Go away." I do not know who spoke. I woke up and thought I had to get away. I sneaked out of the tent and started walking home. In the village, people were very surprised to see me. They said they thought I had died. "What do you mean?" I asked them. "I have only been away for a week." "No," they said. "We have not seen you for more than a month."

Accounts like these, it will be argued, provide important clues to understanding some of the more mysterious aspects of North European rock art – such as scenes of metamorphosis (featuring 'therianthropes' or figures with both human and animal characteristics) and sexually charged scenes involving animals. They stories highlight the essential sameness of humans and animals, and the ease with which one can get lost in the world of non-human beings. Max putting on a wolf-costume or Nikolai following a deer (apparently in a human costume) is enough to take them to a different world, from which they awake only due to some external wake-up call. I shall try to shed more light on the relevance of such experiences in the following by looking at representations of elks, humans and so-called 'elk-headed staffs' at select North European hunter-gatherer rock art sites (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Map showing the locations of the main rock art sites discussed in the text. (Map: Antti Lahelma)

Ambiguous images

When Christopher Tilley published his ~~famous~~ book on the hunter-gatherer rock carvings of Nämforsen, Sweden, (Tilley 1991), he introduced the readers to the site by presenting a selection of 'strange' scenes. The images that intrigued him (Fig. 2) included a scene where a human couple – the woman clearly pregnant – stand next to an upturned, disembodied elk head. There was a 'love scene' overlooked by an interested elk. There were boats transforming into elks, elks transforming to humans, and even what he identified as a 'double-headed elk accompanied by a sexually aroused man'.

Figure 2. Some of the images from Nämforsen that intrigued Tilley. (Figure source: Tilley 1991).

Tilley's point was that, contrary to what was argued by an earlier generation of archaeologists (e.g., Hallström 1960), these cannot all be images related to hunting magic, or even fertility magic, but the interpretation of Nämforsen must go beyond such simplistic models. And then he went into a complicated discussion about structuralism, material culture as text, hermeneutics, semiotics and so on – with the ultimate aim of demonstrating that the art is inherently ambiguous. He argued that Nämforsen has no essential, firm meaning, and never had one, but was always open to a multitude of different readings. I have also been intrigued by these images and others like them, and while I acknowledge that some prehistoric art may be ambiguous to the point that searching for a firm meaning is futile, I have always found Tilley's all-encompassing conclusion hard to accept.

I have previously attempted to decipher the layers of meaning in these ambiguous images in the light of the rich northern ethnographic record (Lahelma 2007), of which Tilley appears to have been largely unaware. My argument was that the images are not ambiguous in the sense implied by Tilley, that is, that they would lack a 'kernel' of meaning and were simply assigned different meanings by different people. Rather, they can be seen to reflect a different or shamanistic-animistic ontology, which defies Cartesian dichotomies such as mind/matter or human/animal, and thus may appear incomprehensible if approached from a 'Modern' perspective.

True, Nämforsen is a site with a very long history and historically stratified meanings, in the course of which new images have been added, older ones have been incorporated into new scenes, and the ensuing palimpsests have been reinterpreted (cf. Sapwell 2017). Because Nämforsen probably represents an emerging complex hunter-gatherer society, it is conceivable that even when the carvings were freshly made, individual images or scenes may have held different meanings for different segments of the society. Small sites that represent a small number of carving or painting events can thus provide more useful material for interpretation than 'mega-sites' like Nämforsen.

I suggested that at sites like Pyhänpää in Central Finland the seemingly unrealistic combining of figures like elks, boats and humans is related to the notion of shamanic flight, where both elks and boats could act as the shaman's steeds or vessels. Because they shared the same soul-essence with the shaman, they could be portrayed in rock art as a single elk-boat-human –entity; an image that would have been unanimously recognizable and intelligible by different contemporary audiences, even if some aspects of the figure may have been esoteric and not understood by all.

In that paper I also drew attention a number of scenes that apparently show sexual intercourse between men and elk (Fig. 3), and interpreted them as the shaman 'tapping into the gendered essence' of the female spirit helper being. Sexual symbolism is heavily present in the shamanic séance, which gradually increases in tempo and reaches a climax, and is thus akin to sexual intercourse (Hoppál 2003), and we do know that Siberian shamans were believed to have sexual encounters with the spirit helpers (Mandelstam Balzer 1996). But although I still find that argument worthwhile, maybe there is more to be said about humans, elks and sexuality than simply associating it with shamanism.

Figure 3. Possible scenes of humans having sex with elks: a) Tupavuori, Finland (image source: Miettinen 2000: 126), b) Åbosjön, Sweden (image source: Hallström 1960, Plate IX:B), c) Tomskaya Pisanicha, Russia (image source: Okladnikov & Martynov 1972: 196), d) Salmenvuori, Finland (image source: Kivikäs 2000: 99).

Hunting and sex

Willerslev (2007: 110) maintains that the association between hunting and sex is practically universal among hunter-gatherers. He cites for example the work of Geraldo Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971), who worked among the Tukano of the Columbian Amazon in the 1960/70s, and presents a wealth of examples from his own work among the Siberian Yukaghir. According to Willerslev (2007: 48), "[The Yukaghir] hunter seeks to induce in the animal master-spirits an illusion of a lustful play … As a result, the spirits come to believe that what is going on is not a premeditated kill but a "love affair" with the hunter." The association between hunting and sex manifests also among the San Bushmen of southern Africa, in whose societies "both hunting activities and sexual activities are given a magnified place in the ideology … and furthermore the two have become so intertwined that one symbolizes the other" (McCall 1970: 18). As a personal anecdote, I might mention that when I worked in the late 1990s as a field archaeologist in a Finnish excavation project at Jabal Haroun in Petra, Jordan, the local (still partly nomadic) Bedouin workmen would sometimes brag about their plans to 'shoot the hyena' during their day off. Grins and winks of the eye made it obvious that this expression was not to be taken at face value.

The association between hunting and sex is, moreover, not limited to foraging or nomadic small-scale societies: according to Judith Barringer, in Ancient Greece (Fig. 4) "real world sex and hunting were closely connected and often thought of as synonymous activities" (Barringer 2001: 126, and see Ch. 2, 'Eros and the Hunt', for an extensive discussion on the topic). A similar association with sexuality may, to a degree, be observed even in some contemporary Western

discourses on hunting. For example, Kalof et al. (2004) found that representations of hunting as a sexually charged activity are common in popular culture images such as newsstand periodicals: according to them, in the hunting discourse of magazines like the *Traditional Bowhunter*, both animals, women and weapons are heavily sexualized.

Figure 4. Sexually aroused Silenus and a fawn. An Athenian black-figure Kylix from Rhodes, ca. 500 BC. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

Willerslev (2007: 110) thinks that this ubiquitous association with hunting and sex ultimately arises from the mimesis involved in seducing the prey. Before the hunt, the Yukaghir hunter will do his best to make himself sexually appealing to elks, such as losing the human smell by bathing, and modifying his body into the image of the animal. In the course of the hunt, he must make animal calls and move in a seductive way. Some writers (e.g., Ingold 2000) have argued that hunter-gatherers will try to persuade the prey to give itself up willingly to the hunters. But according to Willerslev (2007: 48), at least among the Yukaghirs, this isn't really so, but hunters in fact rely on sexual trickery. They seduce the animal into a sexual frenzy, in which it is so blinded by love and lust that it throws itself at the hunter, who can then shoot it. Having done this, the hunters feel guilty, and try to blame the death of the animal to someone else (such as the Russians).

The flip side of the coin of flirting with animals is that a close encounter with the hunted animal can lead to a too deep immersion into the world of animals, as we saw in Nikolai Likhachev's account cited in the introduction. If the hunter starts feeling pity and is seduced by the animal, perspectives can shift: the hunter may see the animal as an attractive woman, follow her to her village, marry her and start living with her band. In Tukano and Yukaghir stories, the issue of having sex is crucial. If you make the mistake of having sex with a prey animal, it is literally 'game over.' You will turn into an animal and be forever lost from the world of human beings.

According to the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998), this kind of shifting of perspectives is characteristic of hunter-gatherer peoples throughout the world. In the modern biological worldview, all animals are the same in the sense that they are biological organisms and have a body but are very different in terms of cognition. However, in the perspectivist point of view, outward appearances or physical bodies differ, but these differences are unimportant. Bodies

are ‘open’ and unstable – they are like pieces of clothing and can be changed. What counts is the soul-essence or mind, which in all seemingly different beings is essentially the same. In other words, all animals see themselves as human beings, they just have a slightly different perspective due to their different diets and physical forms (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470). From the perspective of an elk, for example, moss or grass might look like meat, and humans might look like wolves or other fearsome predators. But when two different beings come into intimate social contact with each other, such as through sharing food or having sex, transformations can happen. A human can transform into an elk or vice versa. However, this type of metamorphosis and perspectivism generally applies only to those animals that are culturally significant, such as great predators and important prey species (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 471), not just any human-animal encounter.

Essentially the same theme of sex and seduction between humans and animals can be found also in recent Fennoscandian folk religion (Tarkka 1994), which survived until the 19th Century in the more remote parts of the region. Various types of preparation preceded the hunt, such as bathing and ritually swiping the body with branches in order to lose human smell and become part of the forest. In Finnish-Karelian hunting spells, male hunters often address the Mistress of the Forest, or the female Owner spirit of the forest and the game, and do their best to present themselves as erotically desirable (Ilomäki 2014). The following is a beginning of a spell recorded by the Finnish historian and folklorist Elias Lönnrot (1802–1884) in Vuokkiniemi, Karelia, in 1834:

> ‘I am wanting, I am thinking
> About visiting the Forest Land
> To fuck the Maiden of the Forest
> To drink the honey of the forest
> The meat below the leaves
> […] Take, Forest, me as your man!
> Take, Woodland, me as your mate!’
> (SKVR I:4, 1095, lines 1–5, 9–10; translated by the author) [1]

Although here the object of seduction is not the animal itself but its Owner spirit, the Forest personified, the aim is still the same: gaining control over the prey through sexual seduction. The same theme is closely echoed in an account given to Willerslev by a middle-aged Yukaghir hunter. His dreams before a hunting expedition involved having sex with the female Owner spirits:

> They live in a wooden house. There is a barn, too. I assume they keep the animals in the barn. They are always glad to see me, the three sisters. When I arrive, they are a little drunk [presumably because of vodka sacrificed in preparation of the hunt]. They start to play around with my penis, edging up to me. If I'm hunting at the upper part of the river, I'll take the oldest sister and we'll go to bed. If I hunt at the middle part, I'll pick the middle sister. And if I'm hunting at the lower part I'll go with the youngest one. When I wake up I know that this season I will have good luck in hunting.' (Willerslev 2007: 175).

As an interesting parallel to the hunting spells, we may consider 17th and 18th century court records from Finland and Sweden, which sometimes feature cases where men were accused of having had sex with spirit beings known as Forest Maidens (Liliequist 1992: 131). However, more significant, and perhaps equally relevant to the present topic, is the fact that cases of bestiality feature prominently in the court records and were extremely harshly punished. In Early Modern Sweden (which then included Finland), bestiality was viewed as a grave social and religious problem – probably to a greater extent than anywhere else in the world – and more people were burned at stake or dismembered because of bestiality than for example because of witchcraft (Keskisarja 2006). This raises the question, why was it apparently so common and why did the legal system treat it so harshly?

Significantly, the animals were viewed (at least to some extent) as responsible accomplices in these crimes, as in addition to many of the perpetrators, the animal partners were also executed or burnt at stake. For example, one testimony given in a bestiality case in 1734 by a farm maid from Turku, south-western Finland, maintains that "as the perpetrator was collecting his clothes from the floor, the cow seemed to be making noises that resembled a song, and viewed the man with so-called sparkling eyes [*med så kallade glittrande ögon*]" (cited in Keskisarja 2006, 161; translated by the author). These kinds of testimonies suggest that in 18th-century Finland, cows and horses were sometimes viewed as active partners in sexual encounters, possibly even initiating them.

Historians are of a mixed opinion on how to interpret such testimonies, but historians of religion have been willing to interpret this as related to animistic notions of the essential sameness of humans and animals (e.g., Laaksonen and Timonen 1997). When domestic animals are taken to human households, this may involve exploitation, but also caring and nurturing, ultimately involving them in social networks (cf. Armstrong Oma 2018). A social being is potentially also a sexual being, and although sex with animals is viewed as bizarre and repulsive from a modern

Western perspective (and even more so from a 17th-century Lutheran ecclesiastic and administrative perspective), in an animistic context it may have been seen as perfectly normal.

Living things

In his article on perspectivism, Viveiros de Castro (1998) makes the point that artefacts can also have subjectivity, especially if the artefact has a particular significance to its owner and a long history of interaction. A kind of soul-essence is thought to flow into particularly important artefacts, and after the person dies, the artefact must either be destroyed, purified ritually, or deposited in the grave. With this in mind, the so called 'elk-headed staffs' (Fig. 5) form a group of artefacts from the North European Stone Age that are of special interest to the present discussion, because they occur in both rock art and burial contexts (e.g., Carpelan 1977; Kashina and Zhulnikov 2011).

Figure 5. Perforated elk-headed 'maces' of stone from Säkkijärvi in Karelia (foreground) and Huittinen in south-western Finland (background) on display at the Finnish National Museum. (Photo: Antti Lahelma)

As portable 'art', elk-headed staffs can be found both as perforated stone artefacts (in which case the original, presumably wooden rod is always missing) or as complete staffs made of either wood, bone or antler preserved either by permafrost (Kola Peninsula), a high pH level of the soil (Karelia), or in a waterlogged condition (Šventoji). Although these artefacts are comparatively rare, their cultural significance is underlined by the extreme longevity of their production. The oldest dated artefacts, such the famous antler staffs of Olenyi Ostrov in Karelia (Gurina 1956) or a perforated soapstone artefact from Huittinen, Finland (Ailio 1912; Fig. 5), date to the Late Mesolithic (around 6000 BCE), while at Kola Peninsula staffs (which may in fact be deer-headed) have been found in Early Metal Period burials dating to ca. 1500 BCE (Kashina and Zhulnikov 2011). In rock art, indisputable depictions of elk-headed staffs occur only at the very largest hunter-gatherer carving sites of Northern Fennoscandia – such as Alta, Kanozero and Nämforsen – suggesting that they were associated with large ritual gatherings and, perhaps, incipient social complexity.

Many of the artefacts are stray finds but, as noted, some have been found in burial contexts, such as the famous finds from the Olenyi Ostrov sites.[2] An interesting aspect of the Karelian Olenyi Ostrov finds is that they appear to have been used on a regular basis. According to the zooarchaeologist Kristiina Mannermaa (pers. comm.), who has studied the artefacts first hand, the

best preserved one features a glossy polish on the rod, indicating heavy use-wear. We don't really know what the staffs were used for, but the fact that they bear an elk head is significant. To wield a carved image of the elk in one's hand may have provided a somatic experience of communicating and engaging with the animal – a sort of a hands-on experience with the elk – and the use-wear suggests a close personal relationship between the artefact and the person it was buried with.

Because the elk-headed staffs are comparatively common at both of the Olenyi Ostrov sites, Kashina and Zhulnikov (2011: 23) argue that rather than artefacts belonging to shamans, the staffs "could have been linked with any man, who reached maturity and began possessing certain rights and responsibilities, including those in the sacred sphere." They argue that had the staffs been associated with shamans, the number of known finds should be close to zero, with the assumption that shamans were rare in any given society. However, shamanism is not always the domain of a few special individuals, but can also be communal. Anthropologically the best-known case of communal shamanism is probably the San shamanism of southern Africa (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1980), but it occurs also in Northern Eurasia, such as among the Siberian Itelmen, who have no specialized shamans with elaborate paraphernalia; rather, almost anyone with the skill of falling into trance can be a shaman.

In the ethnographic records of Siberian shamanism, animal-headed staffs emerge widely as one of the main instruments of the shaman aside with the drum, used for example by the Nganasan (Znamenski 2003: 143), Ket (Znamenski 2003: 139) and Tuvans (Znamenski 2003: 266). Among the Buriats,

> A staff was decorated with a horse head carved on its top and a horse hoof carved on its bottom. A few small bells were attached to this stick as well as braids of different colors, furs of small animals, and small stirrups, which made the staff resemble a horse. Like the drum, the staff symbolized a horse, which a shaman used to journey to the underworld, middle world, and upper world." (Znamenski 2003: 44).

Among the Buriats, as with several other Siberian peoples, the staffs (*khur*) were associated with the lowest levels of shamanic initiation, and were followed by 'more advanced' instruments like the drum later on (Znamenski 2003: 46). Although Znamenski writes above that staffs "symbolized" a horse, the sources he cites make it evident that – like drums – they were literally perceived as living beings, and there were specific rituals for 'enlivening' shamanic instruments (e.g. Vajnštejn 1968; cf. Lahelma 2007). If the animal-headed staffs indeed were shamanic instruments comparable to

drums, it seems probable that – like drums – they were highly personal items, infused with the 'soul-essence' of the shaman, and thus also imbued with agency. Rock art evidence, to which we will now turn ~~to~~, also seems to indicate that the staffs were in some cases perceived as independent actors, i.e. imbued with a life and will of their own, and in some way associated with sexuality and reproduction.

Rock art, sexuality and elk-headed staffs

Sexually aroused males are a characteristic feature of Bronze Age South Scandinavian rock art (e.g., Almgren 1927; Coles 2005) – indeed, almost all human figures tend to be ithyphallic. It may be intended to show the overall virility of the warriors, their reproductive prowess, or something similar, but things are quite different in with northern hunter-gatherer rock art, where most of the time biological sex isn't indicated at all (see Malmer 1981). The few instances where it is shown are therefore significant and indicate that the maleness of the figure (or, in some cases, femaleness), and his state of sexual arousal, are relevant in the particular context where they are depicted.

Figure 6. *(a)* The 'Devil' of the Old Zalavruga site at River Vyg (image source: Savvateyev 1970). *(b)* A male figure with an elk-headed staff facing what is probably a capercaillie (image source: Kolpakov and Shumkin 2012: 189). *(c)* Two humans holding staffs, facing each other and accompanied by an elk (image source: Helskog 1988) and a 'married couple' accompanied by a staff-wielding human (image source: Kolpakov and Shumkin 2012: 318). *(d)* Two humans holding different-sized staffs, facing each other (image source: Helskog 1988). *(e)* A human figure touching the muzzle of an elk with an elk-headed staff (image source: Helskog 1988).

With some figures, such as the famous 'Bes' (Devil) from the Old Zalavruga site at the mouth of River Vyg (Savvateyev 1970), Karelia, we are missing the context (Fig. 6a). The man (or, perhaps, an anthropomorphic spirit) is aroused, but there is no clear indication why, unless it has to do with the cup-mark in front of him – which some scholars (e.g., Almgren 1927) might argue is a possible vulvic symbol. There is a series of huge footprints that lead to the man through a flock of swans, whales and elks, so maybe the implication is that he is somehow related to all of the said species – perhaps their 'Owner'. A male with an almost equally exaggerated penis (Fig. 6b) can be found at the carvings of Kanozero on the Kola Peninsula, but this scene offers a bit more in terms of visual clues. The man is juxtaposed with what is probably a capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*), a culturally significant and tasty bird that was widely hunted in the historical period, and he is brandishing an elk-headed staff at the bird. It is a rather weird scene, but like the images of bestiality I have discussed earlier (in Lahelma 2007), it makes it very explicit that in rock art the encounter between

humans and animals can sometimes be sexually charged. It also indicates that these three elements are probably somehow connected in rock art: sexual arousal, prey animals and elk-headed staffs.

A second scene at Kanozero features a human couple, the woman pregnant and the man holding a hunting spear. The man also has a long zigzagging line between his legs (Fig. 6d). Whether that represents an exaggerated and rather eccentric penis, or a snake, or something completely different, is difficult to say, but the presence of the elk-headed staff recalls the 'married couple' accompanied by an elk head at Nämforsen – one of the figures that inspired Tilley's (1991) book (cf. Fig. 2). At Alta, we find another scene that recalls Tilley's examples (the 'love scene'), but with a somewhat different composition: a large elk is overlooking two humans brandishing elk-headed staffs at each other (Fig. 6c). Given the swollen body, the one on the right may be a woman, and the scene thus related to the theme of sexuality and reproduction. However that may be, the elk monitoring the 'fight' indicates once again that in rock art, elks appear to be engaging with the world of humans in ways that are more complex than a simple hunter-prey relationship.

At Alta, people holding elk-headed staffs occur in various different kinds of situations that involve movement and action, such as drumming, suggesting that the staff is not simply a 'sceptre' (i.e., an indicator of status) but an object used for some purpose. Figures wielding staffs are often brandishing them at each other, and while this could be interpreted in a number of ways, some scenes suggest a confrontation between the staff-wielders. A particularly interesting case at Alta consists of a person wielding a staff larger than him- or herself, opposed to a human figure wielding a tiny staff (Fig. 6e), which may plausibly depict a hierarchical relationship based on rank, age or supernatural power (such as the different levels of initiation of Buriat shamans discussed above). This recalls the shamanic battles of Sámi *noaidi* (shamans) described by the Norwegian missionary Jens Kildal (1683–1767). Kildal, who was active at the Vesterålen islands ca. 300 km to the south-west of Alta, described the nature of the battles, and informs us that "there is the custom among Lapps, that whichever *noaidi* is proficient with his magic, in repulsing other *noaidis,* is chosen as the *noaidi* of the multitude, and then receives the general *noaidi* wage from each man" (cited and translated by Tolley 1994: 149). If such struggles, where shamans competed each other in an effort to subdue rivals and establish a hierarchy of shamanic power, took place among the Sámi in the Early Modern Period, it is not very far-fetched to suggest that they may have taken place in the same region in prehistory as well.

In a few cases at Alta (in the Kåfjord panel), the two opposing staff-wielders wear different types of staffs: one with a fully pecked staff, the other having a striped staff (Helskog 2014). This seems to echo the internal markings of the elk and reindeer at the site, which likewise can be fully pecked or striped. Fuglestvedt (2018) sees these markings as indicating totemic clans, and if we follow that argument, it is conceivable that the different types of staffs similarly denote members of different clans engaged in a magical struggle.

As at Nämforsen and Kanozero, people wielding staffs sometimes are sometimes juxtaposed not just with each other, but also with elk. A famous image from Alta shows a person apparently hitting or touching the muzzle of an elk with an elk-headed staff (Fig. 6f); a geometric symbol sometimes (but based on little evidence) interpreted as a trap or a hunting pit is depicted under the elk. Gjerde (2010: 123) suggests that it may depict an actual hunting scene, and while this may be so, I am inclined to think that the staff is not being used as a weapon but as a mediating instrument in the shamanistic seduction of prey. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that at Nämforsen, Kanozero, Alta and Vingen, elk-headed staffs are sometimes depicted without a person holding the item. At the major rock carving site of Vingen, Western Norway, staffs appear to 'herd' the red deer (Lødøen 2015), and at the panel of Lillforshällan at Nämforsen staffs are sometimes depicted as 'crew-members' on a boat (Hallstöm 1960, Fig. 79). Images like this suggest that in some contexts, elk-headed staffs could be understood as independent agents, with a will and power to act independently of their owners.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to explore a group of apparently related scenes in North Fennoscandian rock art, comprising elks, humans and elk-headed staffs – sometimes in settings that are obviously or implicitly of a sexual nature – in the light of cross-cultural ethnographic information concerning hunting. Some of the themes emerging from this body of rock art material are: sex between humans and elks, metamorphosis between humans and elks, and elk-headed staffs used in a variety of contexts. The latter seem to include an association between staffs and sexual arousal (and pregnancy), mediating contact between humans and elks (and other animals), and apparent scenes of confrontation or power struggle. Sometimes the staffs also seem to exhibit independent agency.

It was argued that a key to understanding some of these scenes lies in an animistic ontology and a 'perspectivist' viewpoint, in which no essential, ontological difference exists between humans and animals (or 'things' such as elk-headed staffs), or the hunter and his prey. Both are deeply entangled

in social relations, the nature of which can also be sexual. In particular, the relationships between the hunter and his prey are typically seen in sexual terms. Some rock art images may indeed be ambiguous and situated in the everyday practical concerns of individuals, but the amazing longevity and geographical scope of the aforementioned themes in Northern rock art repertoire indicates that they arose from a cultural 'grammar' shared by most members of the society.

While the elk-headed staffs do seem to associate some of the art with the dealings of religious specialists, or 'shamans', experiences and encounters with non-human beings may have been commonplace and not limited to shamans. Willerslev writes that among the Yukaghirs, the shamans claim to have sexual relations with spirits, but so do ordinary hunters: 'Many hunters claim to have one or more helping spirits with whom they copulate during their nightly dreams and who provide them with hunting luck in return' (Willerslev 2007: 131–32). Because such encounters involved an acute risk of being turned into an animal, and of being forever lost from friends and family, they were potentially very dangerous. With this in mind, it seems reasonable to assume that the imagery related to them was widely understood – rather than being a hall of mirrors of baffling ambiguity.

Notes

[1.] SKVR refers to the publication series Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot ('Ancient Poems of the Finnish people'), I:4 is the number of the volume and 1095 is the number of the poem in the volume. In the Finnish original, the verses in question are as follows: 'Mieleni minun tekisi / Mieli käyä Metsolassa / Metsän neittä naiakseni / [Metsän] mettä juoakseni / Lihoa lehen alaista […] / Ota, metsä, mieheksesi / Urohiks[esi], tapio.' (Niemi 1919)

[2.] Confusingly, there are two important prehistoric burial grounds in north-western Russia called Olenyi Ostrov ('Deer Island'): the more famous one dates to the Mesolithic and is located in Karelia (Gurina 1956), while the one on the Kola Peninsula (Gurina 1953) is much younger. Both sites have yielded elk- or deer-headed staffs in excavation. To distinguish between them, the former is sometimes referred to as 'Yuzhnyi' (Southern) and the latter 'Kolskii' (Kola) Olenyi Ostrov.

Notes on Contributor

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